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# “NEGRO QUESTION.”

BY

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It is generally conceded that slavery is dead. That it is so, *in fact*, may be said of some portions of our country only ; that it promises to be so everywhere, in the early future, may be anticipated with confidence. The question of its abolition, therefore, need not be discussed.

But, what to do with the millions whom slavery has oppressed, and who are now becoming free, is the vital question of the day—vital to the country—to the race—to the cause of humanity, the world over.

In these few pages, I propose to offer some reflections which are the result of observation and inquiry, concerning the present status of freedmen in those portions of our territory recently recovered by the Federal army, which may throw some light upon this question.

They are free by the exercise of military power, and it has thus become one of the functions of the War Department, to take them in charge.

They are helpless, friendless, scattered, without civil law or social bonds. The army rescues them, and throws around them a defence. The medical bureau furnishes hospitals, and hospital care to the needy. The incompetent, from age and infancy, are collected in asylum camps, while the able-bodied men are taken into the service as soldiers, or put to work on fortifications or farms. This seems to be the most natural provision that can be made for them under the necessary rigidity of a war policy.

They have escaped into our lines, or remained in their homes, as their masters have escaped before our advancing forces, without any defined relation to the Government, or to

each other. The army supply-list does not contemplate the demands of these thousands, and while the clemency of the Government has prevented, as far as possible, immediate suffering, the claims upon private benevolence for clothing, &c., have been answered with a profusion and alacrity, that are characteristic of American philanthropy and enterprise.

At this phase of the work, however, difficulties are apt to arise from the exuberance of public sympathy and effort on the one hand, and the inflexible ritual of the army code on the other. These comforts and clothing so generously bestowed, are forwarded, and of necessity, fall into the hands of military agents, who distribute them according to their judgment, or under orders from their superiors. If these distributions prove to be, or are supposed to be misapplied in any way, suspicions and objections on the part of donors, grow into avowed distrust and opposition, so that the work is hindered.

Kindly intentions and generous offices, both on the part of Government officials, and of benevolent people, instead of being co-ordinate, and co-operative, become distinct and antagonistic. Such is now the state of things, to some extent, in the valley of the Mississippi. On the Atlantic coast, a more complete organization of the work, under the direction of Major-General Butler, has in some measure, modified these contradictory elements; and yet even in this department, obstacles will grow out of the fact that the channel of an inflexible military order, is too narrow in the people's estimation, for the free current of their liberality.

We have to learn what war is, and what are its demands. It is certain that nothing can be done at present for the relief of this people, except through the war power. The military government is the only government of these newly recovered lands. Military officers are the only officers for the administration of law, and the preservation of order. There are no magistrates, no courts, no justice, save that of the sword. Every agent representing private bounty—every teacher representing an educational society—every minister sent out from a church, all act in their respective spheres by sufferance; they



are *allowed* by the military power to remain at their posts. This state of things is a necessity. It can only be removed when civil law is restored. We must therefore, use this channel of communication in order to reach the objects of our sympathy.

Next, the Government is represented in these disorganized regions by its treasury agents, who take possession of abandoned lands, and seek to turn them to account. No man can of right, occupy the soil without the consent of the Government, which has become its temporary proprietor.

The freed man finds himself in his own birth-place, with the cabin in which he has been reared, still his only shelter, and with the fields before him that he has trod with his own weary feet, and watered with his own sweat, all his life long, his master gone, and a new owner for the plantation. That owner is the free Government, and he, for the first time, his own possessor. He has no fee in the land, no *legal* claim even upon himself. He is only free, because the law which made him a slave, has been broken by that strong arm which conquered slavery, and now gives him the opportunity to stand alone, and feel himself his own. A strange sensation after years of bondage !

His relation is not only changed to his former master, but it is changed to the soil—to everything. Once he was classified, valued, and managed as the plantation and all its appliances were. He was a part of the stock in business; he knew it, felt it, abhorred it, but could not help it. Now, he is not a chattel; he cannot be classified, valued, and managed as property. He is *himself*. As such, the Government recognizes him; as such, he claims to be what other men are. He is a man—a citizen—a soldier—or whatever his opportunities, his abilities, or his tastes may make him.

Where, then, if we adopt this theory, is the difficulty in the solution of the question, “What shall be done with the negro?”

Feed him, and clothe him through the instrumentalities furnished by the Government; thus supplementing by private contributions, what the War Department cannot provide, and

he will be fed and clothed for a space, till he can measure his manhood and find his level. In many places this has already been done. Witness the sea islands of South Carolina and elsewhere.

The Military and Treasury Departments of the Government, (while one defends the people, and the other possesses the land,) neither proposes to civilize the one, or cultivate the other. This is the field for christian teaching and skillful labor.

How may it be accomplished?

*First.* Admit the manhood of the freedman. Let all the habiliments of his bondage be cast aside. He has strength, courage, resolution, endurance—the qualities of physical manhood.

*Second.* Admit his moral responsibility. He has conscience, spirit, immortality. He is subject to spiritual influences. He perceives, thinks, judges. He believes, hopes, adores. He is an entire man—rude it is true; dwarfed in intellectual vigor it may be; and yet his entire manhood is undoubted.

Surround him with appliances for the cultivation of these qualities. Give him the opportunity for civilizing and improving himself in all the relations of home, and in all the industries of the community.

The congregation of the disabled and dependent among themselves, as of cripples, the aged, and very young, is an unnatural state of society. It does not tend to civilization.

The true order is, first the family, then the community of several families, the school, the church, the hospital, the asylum. All should belong to each community. No community is perfect without them all. The ministrations of care and duty to the helpless, should not be removed too far from the common services of life. They constitute a part of the means for promoting true civilization. Widowhood, infirm age, helpless infancy, sickness, and death, are household kindred. They serve to make home dear, where Christian civilization has reached its highest development. As the fragrance of some plants is sweetened by the branches or leaves being bruised, so is the



fragrance of family affection purified, where dependence or sorrow renders care and watching a part of duty.

The negro race is docile, obedient even to subserviency, of a strong religious faith, and yet lacking too much the attachments of family and home. Slavery has made it so, and the first lesson of freedom should be, to restore these vagrant qualities of the freedman's heart to their wonted hold upon his nature.

Recover the family relation. Teach,—not dogmas, but duties; conjugal, parental, and social.

In labor, let it be for the laborer himself; not for the Government only, for a company or a proprietor, but for the *laborer*, his family, his home; that he himself may become the proprietor, and occupy his own homestead for his wife and children.

To this end, let the Government hold the soil for purchase, not by half acres, but by tracts of fifty acres, more or less, for all deserving persons, who shall earn and hold it in their own right, being responsible to the law for good citizenship.

To deny that the freedmen are, as a class, prepared for their new position, is to deny our own experience as a people. We have opened our ports to the oppressed of other lands, and invited them alike to our western fields, and our eastern cities, and they have come with degradation no less than that of Southern Slaves, with habits and proclivities no more pure and elevated, and many are now useful citizens of our States, and have added largely to our productive industry and wealth. Their children have found free schools, and are rapidly adding increased intelligence to the mass of society. The situation of the people in some of the counties of Ireland before emigration to this land, was, in some respects, analagous to that of the negro here. They lived in cabins no better than the negro quarters of South Carolina, and had no better advantages of education than the field hands of the Sea Islands. And the result of experiment has proved that both, when emancipated from the thralldom of aristocratic rule, have risen to enjoy their manhood with less struggle than it cost them to subdue it.

In one respect, the negro has the advantage. His religion is radiant with hope, his faith solid with endurance, his trust as peaceful and confident as that of children towards a parent; and when he breaks through his thralldom, these inward heart impulses make him pliant, and easily adapted to new scenes and circumstances. He is not bound by the conventionalities of a priesthood, that retard rather than promote expansion, but grows from the concrete to the abstract, out of the mass into his own individuality—and this is the true instinct of the civilizing process. It develops genius, power, self-government, &c., and while it distinguishes man as a unit, enables him to fill an important place in the aggregate. There must be instrumentalities employed to perform this task of construction and organization. What should they be?

Take the work as it now stands. Clothing is distributed freely, sometimes by military, and sometimes by private agents. Much is wasted or misapplied doubtless, by indiscretion on the part of both classes of distributors, and hence the necessity for a proportionate increase of supplies; for waste and misapplication are necessities in such a state of confusion as exists among unformed communities. Schools are established by private individuals, societies and churches. They spring up wherever a teacher may find a foothold, and gather pupils around him. In this formative condition the field now lies before us, with the assurance that the circumstances of war will continue to re-produce the same routine of occupation and liberation, till the last acre of Slave territory shall be redeemed.

But it is for a wise philanthropy to take this primal organism and mould it after a fashion that shall liken it to a healthy civilization. Men and women of genius, of constructive talent, of pure benevolence, are needed, not so much in the advance to gather up the material, as in the rear to mould it when it may be gathered.

Those who have already imbibed the *animus* of the cause, and are capable of appreciating the instincts and aspirations of the negro; those who appreciate that according to the infinite law, the account is to be balanced with the race, are the persons



needed for the exigencies of the day. For we did not know that they gave us corn, and wine, and oil, and multiplied our silver and gold which we prepared for Baal. "Therefore," saith the prophet, "will I return to take away my corn in the time thereof, and in the season thereof, and will recover my wool and my flax, given to cover your nakedness." Hosea, ii. 8, 9. We must pay back the debt.

Under the present system of toleration, and even aid, furnished by the war power, but comparatively little can be done for the permanent organization of peaceful institutions. It can only be when civil authority is restored, and religious liberty and educational talent, and industrial enterprise, all find their places and their work, that the process of social development can be perfected. How far this may be fostered by law, and how far the state laws, when states begin again to assume their former relation to the Federal Government, may sympathize with the true philosophy of elevation and civilization, is a question of most serious import, and it behooves the Government to anticipate the obstructions that will be presented by a too early recognition of state sovereignty, in those sections of the country where slavery has corrupted public morals, and rendered the governing faculty imbecile. First renovate, then allow state organizations and laws, to resume their former functions. Until then, build the foundations of civilized society over the ruins of slavery, by the full exercise of the Federal power, and the employment of the best available talent in the work of social organization.

Northern churches are already in the field, occupying as far as they may, the waste places that have been deserted by slave-holding teachers, and are preparing to give form and substance to the crude masses, who, while they cling to their religion with its strange admixture of truth and superstition, desire to be recognized and classified in this, as in other relations to civilized people.

Neither military or civil law will do more than protect and foster the labor of churches. The military power opens the way, and throws the people on to the advancing church, just as

it throws them on to the school-teacher, and opens the whole field to diligent workers.

The agriculturalist is also following up the train, and opening farms for corn, cotton and tobacco. So far, however, the labor is chiefly for the profit of the lessee, or the party whom he represents. Inducements are offered to capitalists to speculate, and tempting figures are presented to show what may be produced from a given expenditure.

The labor is done by freedmen and freedwomen; they are paid, and prove themselves not only competent to earn, but to husband, and enjoy comforts that they have not before known; and yet the capitalist and the Northern farmer, who never before saw a cotton field—who never knew its productiveness, and much less how to cultivate it, become the recipient of the profits, assuming that the negro is unprepared to be a freeholder, though from the negro he gets not only all his tobacco and cotton, but all his knowledge of how to produce them.

If wealthy corporations in the North, would occupy farms and instruct the freed laborers how to live, and enjoy in the best manner the fruits of their labor, and apportion to them certain tracts of land, either as lessees or as proprietors, when the title to land will admit of transfer, and let the profits go to stimulate personal thrift and industry, they would be civilizing a down-trodden people, and accomplishing a great work for humanity. The negro thus circumstanced, could not only pay his Government tax, but pay to church, and school fund, and contribute in all legitimate methods to the general interests of the community, while he would be individualizing himself, thus strengthening his own manhood and the manhood of his race.

We do him injustice in claiming for him but little more than bone and muscle. We are mistaken also when we suppose him to be in an unexpected position. Long before the wisdom of legislators, and secretaries, and presidents, saw the day of redemption, it was believed, hoped for, anticipated, *seen*, on every plantation in the South. They have been not only looking for this day, but preparing for it, and so far as the disabilities of the slave code would allow, they have improved their opportu-



nities. They claim only to be men, and ask of us to give them the common rights of humanity, and nothing more. They are ignorant and thriftless as slaves; but in the atmosphere of freedom all men thrive. Freedom is the normal state of manhood; without it, no one can be true to his instincts and his destiny; with it, all may develop according to their capacity and advantages.

#### REVIEW.

Our duty seems to be,

1. To conform to, and co-operate with all the military regulations concerning the care and conduct of this people, until the military supremacy shall be withdrawn.

2. To scan well the present temporary organizations of camps and schools, correct existing evils, and construct a basis for society that shall comport with the best experience and knowledge.

3. To employ no persons as teachers but those who appreciate the wants of an anxious and earnest people; and with a fair knowledge of human nature, possess an abiding trust in the final accomplishment of the work under the direction of an all-wise Providence.

4. In all the industries and economies of life, to have the best guardians and instructors, who shall devise and execute means for increasing the productiveness and dignity of labor.

5. To employ no person in any relation to this people, who may feel it to be a part of his duty or his plan, to use the lash in the exercise of discipline.

And in entering upon the work, to assume that freedmen are *at once* able as honest laborers, to earn an honest living; that having built houses and ships; worked at all kinds of mechanical trades; raised cotton, rice, corn and tobacco; manufactured sugar and turpentine; wrought in mills for sawing and grinding; steered vessels of sail and steam; governed plantations, and preached the gospel for their masters, they are still able to enter upon these active pursuits with new incentives to enterprise, and with fresh promise of reward.

